

Jobs left Abrams, but not the spirit

'Lot of people like this kind of life'

By Tom Vanden Brook

Press-Gazette

ABRAMS — When Earl Van talked about Abrams, he spoke with a wistfulness for days gone by.

Van pointed to where a 15-room hotel had been the heart of an active commercial hub. As he looked out the window of his feed, grain and hardware store on a recent gray day, a freight train rumbled past, gently shaking the building.

It left town without stopping.

"When I was a kid, Abrams used to be bigger than Pulaski, bigger than Oconto Falls because it was a lumber town. The hotel had two barber shops, served three meals a day and was usually filled," said Van, 78, a community activist who has spent all but the first two years of his life in Abrams.

Van recalled a time some 70 years ago when regular passenger train service conveyed salesmen from Milwaukee and Chicago to Abrams so they could cover their northern territories. The salesmen would stay in Abrams for weeks.

Built on a foundation of agriculture, commerce and timber, Abrams thrived.

But jobs in farming and logging dwindled. Railroads stopped bringing passengers. Abrams residents, looking for work in industry, found opportunities as Coleman, Oconto, Oconto Falls and most important, Green Bay, grew and developed.

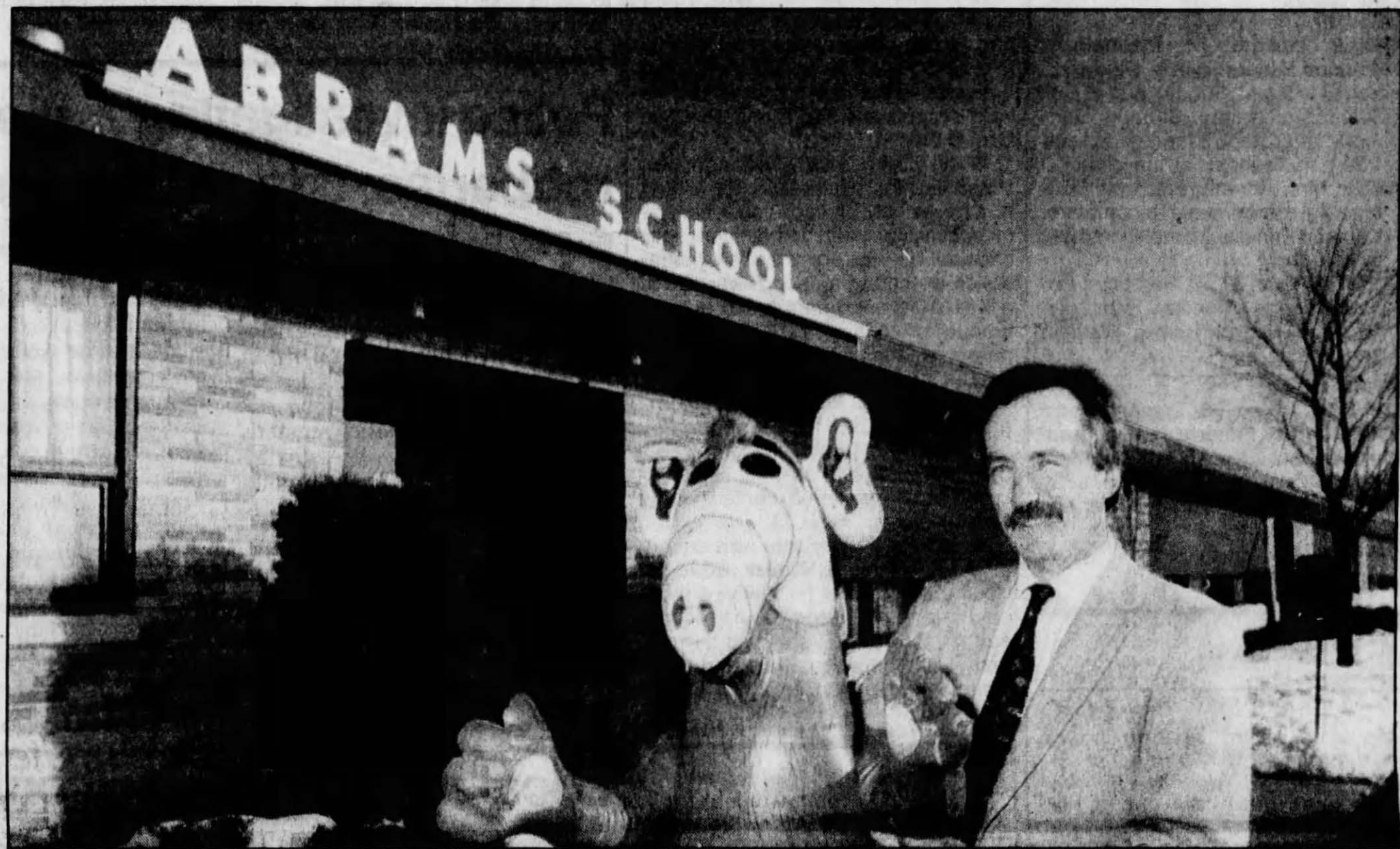
The proximity of Green Bay, 20 miles to the south, sapped Abrams' potential for growth, Van said. Jobs, shopping and other offerings of a city lured away industry and hindered expansion. Abrams' best and brightest moved on.

"We've got no employment opportunities here, no factories," Van said of Abrams' economy. "And there's really no room for growth. I don't want to downplay the town, but I've got to be realistic."

Some Abrams residents, with all due respect to Van whom they credit with prodding the community to improve itself, say his realism is just pessimism.

Although Abrams has evolved, these residents say the changes are for the best. In fact, they point with pride to services the community of about 200 provides its citizens, services not found in towns several times Abrams' size.

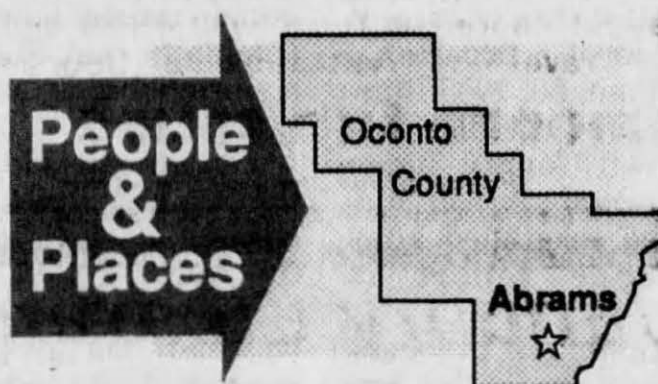
Behind the counter at the U.S. Post Office in Abrams, Postmaster Maxine Jahnke, acted as a one-woman Welcome Wagon and Chamber of Commerce.



Press-Gazette photo by Joan E. Gutheridge

Alf greeting: Principal Tom Lutz stands in front of Abrams Elementary School recently with his friend Alf, which Lutz dresses for holidays during the

school year and faces out his office window. When the kids have been good, Lutz waves Alf's hand goodbye to the children after school.



Today's community profile on Abrams launches a weekly feature in the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*. The feature will look at small area communities and the people who make them tick.

"We're a bedroom community for Green Bay," said Jahnke, who commuted for several years to Green Bay's General Mail Facility on Packerland Drive. "It only takes 20 minutes to drive there. We don't have a whole lot of business here, but we're growing all the time. You can't

even rent a place to live here. They're all filled up."

Across the street from the post office at First Interstate Bank, Barb Peterson, the branch manager, agreed with Jahnke. Peterson said simply that Abrams is a good place to live.

"A lot of people like this kind of life," Peterson said. "It's a personal thing. I like living in a small community that's away from the city. But we're still close to Green Bay. It's an easy drive by four-lane highway so shopping, hospitals and other things are close by."

"People are friendly here. You get to know your neighbor, that doesn't always happen in larger towns."

And, by all accounts, Abrams is a well-appointed bedroom community for neighboring economic centers. Along with a bank, Jahnke said it boasts a small but well-stocked grocery store, four churches, a volunteer fire department, its own telephone company, restaurants and gas stations just outside town near the junction of U.S. Highways 41 and 141,

and two golf courses. The U.S. Postal Service also plans to build an expanded post office for Abrams. A proposal for a new town hall is also in the works.

"And," said Jahnke with a grin, "they're not going to put that dump in the Machickanee." Jahnke referred to the apparent demise recently of a proposed landfill in the nearby Machickanee Forest, a popular recreational area.

But perhaps the most critical element for families with small children, Abrams offers an elementary school built in the late 1950s and generally credited to Van's organizational prowess.

School enrollment expands continually as families seeking refuge from the city choose Abrams, on the fringe of the northern forest, as a place to put down roots, Jahnke said.

"Every road you drive down around here you see a new driveway where somebody's putting in a new house," Jahnke said. "We're growing all the time."

■ **Next week:** Curran in Brown County



Press-Gazette photo by Joan E. Gutheridge

Weigh-in: M. Maxine Jahnke, rural Abrams, weighs a package at the Abrams Post Office where she has been postmaster for the past 4½ years.



Press-Gazette photo by Joan E. Gutheridge

Abrams hub: Walking in front of the general store and U.S. Post Office building on a recent winter day in Abrams are, left to

right, Randy Hansen, Don Vanden Langenberg and Le Meryl Isable, all of Abrams in Oconto County.